Vietnam and the American Political Tradition

The Politics of Dissent

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Introduction

Randall B. Woods

Political and diplomatic history have fallen into disrepute of late. They are, critics proclaim, concerned with power, elites, and white males, both living and dead. The subfields are allegedly subject to "top-down" treatment and largely ignore the inarticulate, disfranchised, and powerless. All of this is true; much work in diplomatic, and to a lesser extent, political history seems repetitive, overly abstract, and unimaginative. And yet, if one reads the *New York Times* or listens to National Public Radio, much of the reporting has to do with politics at home and abroad, and the interaction between nation states. That is so because educated laypeople find such topics not only interesting but important. They do have a point. In the United States, at least, the national political arena is not only where interests project their power but where the people's representatives discuss the nation's values and goals, in the process forging its very identity. The realm of international relations is where national goals, values, and ideologies compete, coexist, conquer, or perish. In the aftermath of the Cold War the threat of religious, ethnic, and tribal conflict has become as important as the danger posed by international warfare. Nevertheless, power is still exercised to a large extent by national governments, both internally and externally. In truth, though, the distinction between culture on the one hand and politics and diplomacy on the other is artificial.

Isolationism has always been a dominant theme in American foreign policy. The nation was born in part out of a desire to separate itself from the evils of European monarchism and colonialism. In the decades that followed the American Revolution, it labored to avoid entanglement in great power rivalries because entanglement might very well have led to conquest by one of those great powers. With the maturing of the U.S.

economy, businessmen, politicians, and diplomats turned their attention to overseas markets and sources of raw materials. The need to preserve and advance the nation's economic interests abroad necessitated a more active foreign policy, but lingering distrust of great power politics and foreign cultures prompted the United States to eschew long-term alliances and act largely alone, a stance historians and political scientists have labeled unilateralism. A third major theme in U.S. diplomatic history has been the notion of American exceptionalism. Throughout its history, the United States has operated with the conviction that its experience was unique, that it was destined to be the freest, most productive, most just society in human history. As the nation was forced to become more active in world affairs, many took the position that if the United States could not preserve its splendid isolation, then it must spread the blessings of its civilization to the less fortunate peoples of the world. Finally, in the aftermath of World War II, the United States seemed to have embraced the notion of internationalism, that is, that in a world made small by modern communications and threatened by nuclear warfare, the interest of the United States was inextricably bound up with the interests of all other nations. It was therefore incumbent on the Republic to surrender a portion of its national sovereignty within the context of a global collective security organization. In fact, America's commitment to pure internationalism has always been more theoretical and rhetorical than real. When vital economic and strategic interests have been at stake, the nation has insisted on retaining its freedom of action.

Knowing these things to be true, many scholars have assumed that the key to understanding America's attitude toward the rest of the world, and hence its role in the international community, is to be found in the dynamics of its own culture rather than in events abroad. Certainly foreign wars, economic competition, and ideologies have had a profound effect on America's foreign policies, but the roots of those policies lay in the prejudices, preconceptions, and practices of the citizenry. Therefore, what better place to study foreign policy than the Congress of the United States? That the Executive rather than Congress is constitutionally empowered to conduct foreign affairs is certainly relevant but does not warrant the dismissal of the nation's legislature as both a means and an end to the study of foreign relations. Unfortunately, the executive branch and its historians have tended to do just that.

The attitudes, interests, and ideologies that were responsible for the United States' involvement in the First (1941–1954) and Second (1960–1973) Indochinese Wars may be found in a study of the Congress and

its ongoing if intermittent dialogue with the Executive. So too may be its decision to withdraw from the latter conflict. In general, senators and members of Congress reflect the regional political cultures from whence they come. Despite the ignorance of many of its members and the irrelevance of their rhetoric – or perhaps because of them – Congress mattered. The events of World War II and the early Cold War combined with the perceptions and preoccupations of the various regions, classes, and ethnic groups comprising the United States to produce the activism that led the nation into the war in Vietnam. Those same views and concerns contributed to the emergence of a congressional consensus in behalf of withdrawal. The argument here, of course, is not that Congress was the cause of American intervention and withdrawal but a rich and perhaps unique matrix for examining those causes.

From 1882 until 1941 Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam comprised French Indochina, France's richest and most important colony. Following France's surrender to Germany in June, 1940, the region was occupied by Japan – either directly or indirectly – until 1945. In 1946, the French returned to Southeast Asia determined to reestablish control in their former possessions.

The war in the Pacific had given a strong fillip to anticolonial movements throughout the area, and Indochina was no exception. Shortly after Japan's surrender in August, 1945, Ho Chi Minh – leader of the Vietminh, a broad-based but communist-led resistance movement – had proclaimed from Hanoi the existence of a new nation, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). Over the next year and a half, however, the French, with the help of the British in the south and the Chinese Nationalists in the north, had managed to reestablish themselves firmly in the south and tentatively in the north. In November, 1946, a bitter colonial war erupted between the French and the Vietminh, culminating in 1954 with France's defeat at the battle of Dien Bien Phu. A subsequent peace conference at Geneva provided for the temporary division of the country at the Seventeenth Parallel. The French withdrew from the peninsula but left an anticommunist regime in place in the south – the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) – under emperor Bao Dai and his prime minister, Ngo Dinh Diem. Within a year Diem had ousted Bao Dai and instituted a presidential system with himself as chief executive. Meanwhile, in the north Ho had established the one-party, socialist DRV.

There was no doubt that Ho, one of the original members of the French Communist Party, was a Marxist-Leninist or that the DRV was a totalitarian regime. After both Moscow and Beijing recognized Ho's government

as the legitimate ruler of all of Vietnam in 1950, the United States concluded that the DRV was a Sino-Soviet satellite and that Ho was a puppet of Stalin and Mao Zedong. Throughout the 1950s the Eisenhower administration poured economic and military aid into Vietnam. Diem briefly attempted land and constitutional reform, but proved unsuited to the task of building a social democracy. A devout Catholic and traditional Mandarin by temperament and philosophy, he distrusted the masses and had contempt for the give-and-take of democratic politics. Increasingly, Diem relied on his family and loyal Catholics in the military and civil service to rule a country in which 90 percent of the population was Buddhist. His brother Ngo Dinh Nhu used the Can Lao Party, the press, and the state police to persecute and suppress opponents of the regime. As corruption increased and democracy all but disappeared, a rebellion broke out in the south against the Diem regime. In 1960 the DRV decided to give formal aid to the newly formed National Liberation Front (NLF), as the anti-Diemist revolutionaries called themselves. A variety of factors combined to ensure that President Kennedy would attempt to hold the line in Southeast Asia. He viewed the conflict in South Vietnam as one of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's wars of national liberation, a test of his administration's resolve just as much as Berlin or Cuba. Kennedy and his advisers had fully accepted the "domino theory," whereby it was assumed that the fall of one government in a particular region threatened by communism would lead to the fall of all noncommunist governments in that area. His agreement in 1961 to the neutralization of Laos, a landlocked nation wracked by communist insurgency, had further strengthened his resolve to ensure that South Vietnam remained a "free world bastion." The number of American uniformed personnel would grow from several hundred when Kennedy assumed office to sixteen thousand by 1963.

Despite American aid, the Diem regime became increasingly isolated from the masses. Bribes and intimidation by civil servants and military officials alienated peasant and urban dweller alike. Law 10/59, which the government had pushed through the rubber-stamp national assembly, had given Nhu's police and special forces the power to arrest and execute South Vietnamese citizens for a wide variety of crimes including black marketeering and the spreading of seditious rumors about the government. By 1963 the nation was teetering on the brink of chaos, with the Vietcong (the military branch of the NLF) in control of the countryside, students and intellectuals demonstrating in Saigon and Hue, Buddhist monks burning themselves in protest, and high-ranking military officers hatching a variety of coup plots.

Shortly before his own assassination in November, 1963, Kennedy had tacitly approved a military coup in Saigon that led to the deaths of both Diem and Nhu. The president had sensed that the United States was on the verge of plunging into a morass from which it could not extricate itself; only the South Vietnamese themselves could establish a broad-based, noncommunist government and make the sacrifices necessary to sustain it. Without that commitment on their part, all the American aid in the world would be for naught. Still, he had been unwilling, for both political and strategic reasons, to stand by and see Vietnam fall to the communists.

Lyndon Jonhson was no more ready than his predecessor to withdraw unilaterally from South Vietnam or seek a negotiated settlement that would lead to neutralization of the area south of the Seventeenth Parallel. Like so many other Americans of his generation, Johnson had learned the lessons of Munich. He would not reward "aggression" with "appeasement" in Southeast Asia or anywhere else. To do so would only invite further aggression. In addition, the Texan felt duty-bound to carry out the policies of his predecessor. He was acutely sensitive to the fact that he had not been elected in his own right. An even more potent factor in the Indochinese equation was the president's fear that right-wing adversaries would prevail over him and his domestic program should South Vietnam fall to communism, just as Harry Truman had been hounded and his policies circumscribed by Senator Joseph McCarthy (D-WI) following the fall of China. Lyndon Johnson had no intention of allowing the charge that he was soft on communism to be used to destroy the programs of the Great Society.

On August 2, 1964, the commander of U.S. forces in the Pacific notified the White House that North Vietnamese torpedo boats had staged an unprovoked attack on two American destroyers in international waters in the Gulf of Tonkin. Two days later President Johnson went on television to inform the nation that a second attack had occurred and that he had ordered U.S. warplanes to retaliate against North Vietnamese patrol boat installations and oil storage facilities. Before his public announcement, LBJ had called members of the congressional leadership to the White House, told them what he intended to do, and asked for a congressional resolution of approval. The Senate debated the Gulf of Tonkin resolution less than ten hours; for much of the time the chamber was less than one-third full. The final vote was an overwhelming 88–2. Consideration in the House of Representatives was even more perfunctory, passage taking a mere forty minutes; the vote was unanimous.

Following Vietcong attacks on American service personnel in early 1965 at Pleiku and Bien Hoa, President Johnson authorized Operation Rolling Thunder, a graduated bombing campaign of North Vietnam designed to cripple the DRV's capacity to wage war and, more specifically, to cut off the flow of troops and supplies coming into the South. In July the White House authorized the introduction of U.S. combat troops into Vietnam. The war in Southeast Asia was now an American war. By the close of the Johnson administration, more than 500,000 U.S. service people were fighting in Vietnam; some 20,000 had given their lives.

Though public opinion polls continued to indicate that a solid majority of Americans supported the war in Vietnam and approved its rationale – the defense of a noncommunist regime from armed attack by the forces of international communism – the country had grown increasingly restive from 1965 to 1968. "Hawks" were convinced that the president was not prosecuting the war with sufficient vigor; "doves" believed that at the very least the United States should stop the bombing of a tiny, impoverished, fifth-rate power situated half way around the world and leave the Vietnamese alone to determine their own destiny. The fact was that there was no viable government in South Vietnam. General followed general in a series of coups. None of the military regimes were able to build broad-based support in South Vietnam. As civilian casualties mounted, the result both of communist terrorism and American–South Vietnamese search-and-destroy operations, anti-Americanism increased correspondingly. In February, 1968, the VC took advantage of Tet (celebrations surrounding the Vietnamese lunar new year) to launch attacks in Saigon, Hue, and dozens of other cities and towns. After initial successes, the VC offensive was crushed. But for many Americans, Tet was the last straw. It seemed to demonstrate that after three long, bloody years of warfare, South Vietnam was no more secure than it had been in 1964. In March, 1968, Lyndon Johnson announced that he would not seek and would not accept the nomination of his party for the presidency. Shortly thereafter, peace talks opened in Paris and immediately stalemated.

Americans elected Richard M. Nixon president in part because they blamed the Democrats for the stalemated war in Southeast Asia. During the 1968 campaign, Nixon and his National Security Adviser–to–be, Henry Kissinger, had been able to hold out the promise of extricating the United States from the Vietnam quagmire without losing the war. They convinced the hawks that the president would do enough and the doves that he would not do too much.

Prior to taking office Nixon and Kissinger had stoutly defended America's commitment to South Vietnam. During the 1968 campaign the Republican candidate had consistently blasted Lyndon Johnson for not doing more on the battlefield to pressure the North Vietnamese; he seemed particularly enthralled with bombing. To Nixon, victory depended on "the will to win," and he boasted to Kissinger that unlike Johnson, "I have the will in spades." America's stand in Vietnam was necessary to contain Chinese communist expansion and to allow "free" Asian nations the time to grow strong enough to defend themselves, he had told the voters. Kissinger took the position that early policymakers had exaggerated the importance of Vietnam to the national interest, but once committed, the United States could not afford to back down. The dispatch of hundreds of thousands of American troops had settled the matter, he argued, "for what is involved now is confidence in American promises."

By inauguration day, however, both Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger were convinced that the war in Vietnam had to be ended. Indeed, during the campaign Nixon had let it be known that he had a "secret plan" to end the conflict in Southeast Asia. But any peace achieved would have to be "peace with honor," and that meant no unilateral withdrawal, no abandonment of the South Vietnamese government then headed by General Nguyen Van Thieu. Nixon had led the attacks on Truman for the loss of China, and like Johnson he feared the political backlash and the deep divisions that would result if it appeared he had "lost" Vietnam. More important, both he and Kissinger believed that it was imperative to deal with China and the Soviet Union from a position of strength rather than weakness.

Indeed, resolution of the conflict in Vietnam had become central to the president's and national security adviser's plan to make the United States the sole arbiter of world affairs. The new Republican administration accepted the implications of NSC-68, that it was necessary to battle communism on every front, but it believed that global containment could be achieved through diplomacy rather than force of arms. In Kissinger's view the Soviet Union and to a lesser extent Communist China were on their way to becoming satiated, status quo powers. If the United States could disarm their fears and appeal to their economic interests, the two communist superpowers might be persuaded to take their places as responsible members of the international community. The opening of communications with Moscow and Beijing and subsequent negotiations would be dangerous and counterproductive, however, if it appeared the United States was

being forced out of Southeast Asia by a tiny underdeveloped nation like North Vietnam.

Richard Nixon wanted to end the war in Vietnam then, but prompted by the JCS, Kissinger, and his new military adviser, General Andrew Goodpaster, the president initially believed that he could do so by winning rather than losing. "I refuse to believe," Kissinger declared, "that a little fourth-rate power like North Vietnam doesn't have a breaking point." The North Vietnamese were on the run, Nixon's advisers reported. In 1967, having fought an unsuccessful guerrilla war, the Communists had decided to change tactics. The result had been Tet, a disaster for the VC. This had been followed by NVA offensives in May and August 1968. Both had been turned back, and in the process B-52s had pulverized enemy troop concentrations. The North Vietnamese had withdrawn 40,000 troops from the south and were in Paris negotiating because they had reached a dead end militarily. If Goodpaster and the JCS were correct, the war was virtually won on the battlefield. America could afford to be tough and drive a hard bargain at the negotiating table, the president decided.

Nixon and Kissinger's strategy was to couple great power diplomacy with force in an effort to win an "honorable" peace at the Paris negotiations. As part of this plan, the president was prepared to threaten the very survival of North Vietnam in order to break the enemy's will. Analogizing between his situation and that faced by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in Korea in 1953, Nixon believed that the threat of annihilation could be used just as effectively against Hanoi as it had against Pyongyang. His image as a hard-line anticommunist would make his warnings credible.

For the next two years Richard Nixon attempted to bully and negotiate his way out of the Vietnam quagmire. He simultaneously announced a policy of Vietnamization and began pulling U.S. combat troops out of Vietnam, authorized a U.S.–South Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1970 intended to destroy NVA and VC strongholds, launched a savage bombing of the North, and continued secret peace talks with the communists in Paris. When the dust had settled, America's position in Southeast Asia was worse strategically and politically than when Nixon took the oath of office. The president was only momentarily taken aback. In early 1971, he decided to continue his policy of lashing out at the enemy while backing out of the ring. To appease critics at home, the timetable for American troop withdrawals was accelerated. Over the protests of General Creighton Abrams, U.S. commander in Vietnam, Nixon ordered the removal of 100,000 troops by the end of the year, leaving 175,000 men in Vietnam of whom only 75,000 were combat forces. At the same time,

the White House authorized a major ground operation, codenamed Lam Son, against communist sanctuaries in Laos. The president's justification was the same as that for Cambodia – to buy time for Vietnamization by disrupting enemy supply lines.

Nothing worked. The Laotian offensive was turned back with heavy casualties, particularly among South Vietnamese forces. In 1972, the North Vietnamese invaded across the Demilitarized Zone. They were eventually repulsed, but only after inflicting heavy losses on the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). Vietnamization coupled with the increasingly active and pervasive antiwar movement in the United States undermined morale among American servicemen in Vietnam. It was clear even to Nixon by the close of 1972 that the United States could not win.

Peace negotiations between Henry Kissinger and North Vietnamese representative Le Duc Tho, conducted intermittently and secretly throughout the Nixon administration's first four years, began in earnest in January 1973. The atmosphere was tense but businesslike. In a matter of days the diplomats has worked out a peace settlement. The United States agreed to withdraw its troops from Vietnam in a specified time period in return for repatriation of American prisoners of war. The Nixon administration was not required to withdraw support from the Thieu government, but NVA troops were free to remain in the south, and the accords granted recognition to the Provisional Revolutionary Government, the political apparatus established by the NLF. President Thieu protested, but to no avail. Nixon quietly let the South Vietnamese leader know that if he did not endorse the accords, the United States would cut off aid. Thieu held out for a time, but then acquiesced. It was just a matter of time until direct American participation in "America's longest war" came to an end.

Nixon had captured the presidency in 1968 by promising "peace with honor." The administration's prolonged disentanglement resulted in an additional 20,553 American battle deaths, bringing the total to more than 58,000. The fighting from 1969 through 1973 took more than 100,000 ARVN and 500,000 NVA and VC lives. The conflict fueled an already alarming inflationary trend in the United States and shook the nation's confidence to its core. America had taken up the burden of world leadership in the wake of World War II believing that it was fighting to save freedom, democracy, and indigenous cultures from the scourge of totalitarianism. It had been confident of its ability to cope with any crisis, make any sacrifice. In Vietnam, however, the United States threatened to destroy what it would save. In its obsession with the Cold War, it ignored the truth that for many peoples, regional rivalries, socioeconomic

grievances, and religious differences outweighed strategic and ideological considerations. With Watergate spreading like the proverbial cancer through his presidency, Nixon was increasingly unable to maintain any sort of consensus in behalf of either continued American participation in the war or continued American support for the South Vietnamese.

The internal struggle in Vietnam reached a denouement more quickly and suddenly than most had anticipated. The peace agreements simply made possible a continuation of the war without direct American participation. The North attacked, the South counterattacked, and the Nixon administration bombed NVA sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia.

Meanwhile, the antiwar movement in Congress, galvanized by Nixon's invasion of Cambodia, reached a climax. From 1970–1972 the House and Senate considered a number of resolutions either limiting or eliminating the president's capacity to make war in Southeast Asia. In the midst of the Watergate scandal, that impetus expanded to include the president's authority to make war in general. The movement to undermine the presidency's war-making powers culminated with congressional passage of the War Powers Act in the fall of 1973. The measure, originally introduced by Senator Jacob Javits of New York, required the president to inform Congress within forty-eight hours of the deployment of American military forces abroad and obligated him to withdraw them in sixty days in the absence of explicit congressional endorsement. As he had promised he would do, Nixon vetoed the War Powers Act, but Congress voted to override on November 7, 1973. The following week the House and Senate endorsed an amendment to the Military Procurement Authorization Act banning the funding of any U.S. military action in any part of Indochina. In the spring of 1975 the North Vietnamese mounted a major offensive, and the ARVN collapsed within a matter of weeks. With South Vietnamese military and civilian officials struggling to be part of the departing American diplomatic contingent, Saigon fell to the NVA and VC on April 30, 1975.

Though they represented very different regions of the country and a variety of political traditions, the influential senators examined in this volume – Albert Gore (D-TN), Frank Church (D-ID), Ernest Gruening (D-AK), J. William Fulbright (D-AS), Mike Mansfield (D-MO), John Sherman Cooper (R-KY), and George McGovern (D-ND) would play a crucial role in destroying the Vietnam consensus that Lyndon Johnson had inherited and that Richard Nixon sought to perpetuate.

Appalled by the carnage in Vietnam, the conversion of hundreds of thousands of sedentary villagers into homeless refugees, and the inability of the United States to raise up and work through any sort of broad-based

political system in the South, McGovern, Church, and company turned against the conflict in Southeast Asia. At various times between 1964 and 1967, they arrived at the conclusion that the war in Vietnam was essentially a civil war and that the United States was simply supporting one side against the other. Indeed, they came to argue that the insurgency in the South was chiefly a response to the repressive policies of the government in Saigon and its American ally. International communism was not monolithic and the domino theory was specious. These legislators, most of them former Cold War activists, came to see that in harnessing their obsession with social justice to anticommunism, liberals had turned the Cold War into a missionary crusade which blinded the nation to the political and cultural realities of Southeast Asia. It also made possible an unholy alliance between realpolitikers preoccupied with markets and bases, and emotionally committed to the domino theory, and idealists who wanted to spread the blessings of freedom, democracy and a mixed economy to the less fortunate of the world. Finally, they came to believe, the nation's misguided crusade in Indochina was threatening the very institutions and values that made America. How and why these senators came to these conclusions and the impact of their positions on the war in Vietnam are the subjects of this volume.